

A. Omarova* , G. Kenzhakimova 

Farabi University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

*e-mail: oaishatt@gmail.com

SELF-RATED HAPPINESS IN CENTRAL ASIAN CITIES: INTERCITY DIFFERENCES AND SOCIAL CORRELATES

Happiness as a subjective characteristic of well-being is associated with the social conditions of everyday life, available resources, and the nature of social relationships. Comparing Central Asian cities makes it possible to examine these relationships across urban contexts that share historical and cultural similarities while differing in their urban conditions. The aim of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of self-rated happiness among residents of Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek and to examine its associations with material conditions, health status, social support, and traditions/values. The empirical basis of the study comprised survey data from 511 respondents from Almaty ($n = 174$), Tashkent ($n = 237$), and Bishkek ($n = 100$), as well as brief responses from 15 experts from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The quantitative stage included descriptive analysis, ANOVA/Welch ANOVA, and Pearson correlation analysis. The results revealed intercity differences in self-rated happiness, health status, social support, and the importance of traditions/values, whereas differences in perceived material conditions did not reach statistical significance. The strongest positive associations with self-rated happiness were found for health status and social support; positive associations were also observed for material conditions and traditions/values. Expert assessments complemented the quantitative findings by highlighting the importance of public spaces, environmental and urban conditions, social capital, and access to urban services. The findings support the need to consider self-rated happiness within the broader context of social resources and conditions of urban life. The value of the study lies in expanding empirical evidence on urban well-being in the Central Asian context, which remains underrepresented in the international literature. The practical significance of the findings lies in their potential use in developing urban social programs and initiatives aimed at strengthening social support, improving access to urban infrastructure, and creating conditions conducive to residents' well-being.

Keywords: self-rated happiness, subjective well-being, social support, health, urban well-being, Central Asia.

А.Н. Омарова*, Г.А. Кенжакимова

Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан

*e-mail: oaishatt@gmail.com

Орталық Азия қалалары тұрғындарының өз бақытын бағалауы: қалалар арасындағы айырмашылықтар және әлеуметтік корреляттар

Бақыт субъективті әл-ауқаттың сипаттамасы ретінде күнделікті өмірдің әлеуметтік жағдайларымен, қолжетімді ресурстармен және әлеуметтік қатынастардың сипатымен байланысты. Орталық Азия қалаларын салыстыру бұл өзара байланыстарды тарихи-мәдени тұрғыдан жақын, бірақ қалалық контексттері әртүрлі ортада қарастыруға мүмкіндік береді. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Алматы, Ташкент және Бішкек тұрғындарының бақытты субъективті бағалауындағы қалалар арасындағы айырмашылықтарды салыстырмалы түрде талдау және оның материалдық жағдаймен, денсаулық жағдайымен, әлеуметтік қолдаумен және дәстүрлермен/құндылықтармен байланысын анықтау. Зерттеудің эмпирикалық базасын Алматыдан ($n = 174$), Ташкенттен ($n = 237$) және Бішкектен ($n = 100$) 511 респонденттің сауалнама деректері, сондай-ақ Қазақстан, Өзбекстан және Қырғызстаннан 15 сарапшының қысқаша жауаптары құрады. Зерттеудің сандық кезеңінде сипаттамалық талдау, ANOVA/Welch ANOVA және Пирсонның корреляциялық талдауы қолданылды. Нәтижелер бақытты субъективті бағалау, денсаулық жағдайы, әлеуметтік қолдау және дәстүрлердің/құндылықтардың маңыздылығы бойынша қалалар арасында айырмашылықтар бар екенін көрсетті, ал материалдық жағдайды бағалаудағы айырмашылықтар статистикалық мәнділік деңгейіне жеткен жоқ. Бақытты субъективті бағалаумен неғұрлым айқын оң байланыстар денсаулық жағдайы мен әлеуметтік қолдау көрсеткіштері бойынша анықталды; материалдық жағдаймен және дәстүрлермен/құндылықтармен де оң байланыстар байқалды. Сараптамалық бағалаулар қоғамдық кеңістіктердің, экологиялық және қалалық жағдайлардың, әлеуметтік капиталдың және қалалық қызметтердің қолжетімділігінің маңыздылығын көрсете

отырып, сандық нәтижелерді толықтырды. Зерттеу нәтижелері бақытты субъективті бағалауды әлеуметтік ресурстар мен қалалық өмір жағдайларының жиынтығы аясында қарастыру қажеттігін растайды. Зерттеудің құндылығы халықаралық әдебиетте жеткіліксіз ұсынылған Орталық Азия контексіндегі қалалық әл-ауқат туралы эмпирикалық деректерді кеңейтумен айқындалады. Нәтижелердің практикалық маңыздылығы оларды әлеуметтік қолдауды нығайтуға, қалалық инфрақұрылымның қолжетімділігін арттыруға және тұрғындардың әл-ауқатына ықпал ететін жағдайлар жасауға бағытталған қалалық әлеуметтік бағдарламалар мен бастамаларды әзірлеуде пайдалану мүмкіндігімен анықталады.

Түйін сөздер: өз бақытын бағалауы, субъективті әл-ауқат, әлеуметтік қолдау, денсаулық, қалалық әл-ауқат, Орталық Азия.

А.Н. Омарова*, Г.А. Кенжакимова

Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан

*e-mail: oaishatt@gmail.com

Самооценка счастья в городах Центральной Азии: межгородские различия и социальные корреляты

Счастье как субъективная характеристика благополучия связано с социальными условиями повседневной жизни, доступными ресурсами и характером социальных отношений. Сравнение городов Центральной Азии позволяет рассмотреть эти взаимосвязи в близких историко-культурных, но различающихся городских контекстах. Цель исследования – провести сравнительный анализ самооценки счастья жителей Алматы, Ташкента и Бишкека и установить ее связи с материальными условиями, состоянием здоровья, социальной поддержкой и традициями/ценностями. Эмпирическую базу составили данные опроса 511 респондентов из Алматы (n = 174), Ташкента (n = 237) и Бишкека (n = 100), а также краткие ответы 15 экспертов из Казахстана, Узбекистана и Кыргызстана. Количественный этап включал описательный анализ, ANOVA/Welch ANOVA и корреляционный анализ Пирсона. Результаты выявили межгородские различия в самооценке счастья, состоянии здоровья, социальной поддержке и значимости традиций/ценностей, тогда как различия в оценке материальных условий не достигли статистической значимости. Наиболее выраженные положительные связи с самооценкой счастья обнаружены для состояния здоровья и социальной поддержки; положительные связи также установлены с материальными условиями и традициями/ценностями. Экспертные оценки дополнили количественные результаты, указав на значение общественных пространств, экологических и городских условий, социального капитала и доступности городских сервисов. Результаты подтверждают необходимость рассматривать самооценку счастья в контексте совокупности социальных ресурсов и условий городской жизни. Ценность исследования состоит в расширении эмпирических данных о городском благополучии в недостаточно представленном в международной литературе центральноазиатском контексте. Практическая значимость результатов заключается в возможности их использования при разработке городских социальных программ и инициатив, направленных на укрепление социальной поддержки, повышение доступности городской инфраструктуры и создание условий, способствующих благополучию жителей.

Ключевые слова: самооценка счастья, субъективное благополучие, социальная поддержка, здоровье, городское благополучие, Центральная Азия.

Introduction

Assessing social progress exclusively through income, employment, and infrastructure is increasingly insufficient. Contemporary well-being research and official statistical standards emphasize that how people evaluate their lives is itself an important social outcome (Diener, 1984; OECD, 2025). Self-rated happiness therefore complements objective indicators by capturing how individuals experience everyday conditions, opportunities, and security. This perspective is especially relevant in urban settings, where rapid change can improve ser-

vices while simultaneously intensifying inequality, environmental stress, and social fragmentation.

The Central Asian context makes this problem analytically distinctive. The region combines post-Soviet institutional transformation, accelerated urbanization, persistent social stratification, and expanding digital governance. Recent regional scholarship shows that subjective well-being cannot be inferred directly from macroeconomic performance alone; it is shaped by social capital, health, safety, cultural norms, and the lived organization of everyday life (Kalyuzhnova & Kambhampati, 2008; Nurdinova, 2025). National quality-of-life monitor-

ing in Kazakhstan points in the same direction by integrating subjective assessments of health, material security, support networks, and life satisfaction into official measurement frameworks (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024, 2025).

Cities are particularly important sites for this analysis. Urban space concentrates educational, medical, administrative, and digital resources, but also exposes residents to unequal access, ecological pressure, housing burdens, time scarcity, and the differentiated quality of public space. Research on Central Asia suggests that urbanization does not automatically raise well-being; rather, it redistributes opportunities and risks unevenly across urban populations (Chulanova, 2024; Makulbayeva et al., 2023). This makes intercity comparison analytically useful for identifying how different urban configurations support or constrain happiness.

At the same time, contemporary urban life is increasingly influenced by digital services and forms of digital interaction. In the present study, however, digitalization is not treated as an independently measured determinant of self-rated happiness. Rather, it forms part of the broader urban context and is considered primarily through the expert component of the study, particularly in relation to access to services, communication, and interaction with the urban environment.

Against this background, the present study compares self-rated happiness among residents of Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek and examines its associations with perceived material conditions, health, social support, and traditions/values. The study addresses two main research questions: (1) Are there differences in self-rated happiness and the examined social indicators across Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek? (2) How is self-rated happiness associated with perceived material conditions, health, social support, and traditions/values?

Subjective well-being is used as the broader theoretical framework of the study, whereas self-rated happiness constitutes its specific empirical focus. These concepts are therefore not treated as interchangeable. The study does not attempt to measure all dimensions of subjective well-being but focuses specifically on respondents' self-assessment of happiness and its associations with selected social conditions.

Literature review

Beyond classic psychological work on subjective well-being (Diener, 1984), recent international

guidance emphasizes that welfare assessment should combine objective conditions with people's own evaluations of life (OECD, 2025; Helliwell et al., 2025). Contemporary research usually distinguishes life evaluation, affect, and eudaimonic meaning, but these dimensions are also strongly conditioned by social structure. For this reason, happiness is no longer treated as a merely individual psychological state; it is analyzed as an outcome shaped by institutions, social inequality, relational embeddedness, and everyday living conditions.

Economic resources remain important within this framework, but they are not sufficient. Kahneman and Deaton (2010) showed that income improves life evaluation while failing to explain emotional well-being in its entirety. The same logic is visible in research on Kazakhstan, where economic preconditions matter but do not exhaust the explanation of happiness (Kalyuzhnova & Kambhampati, 2008). A satisfactory account of urban happiness therefore requires material factors to be examined together with health, social relations, and institutional context.

Social capital theory provides a strong basis for this broader interpretation. Coleman (1988) conceptualized social capital as a resource embedded in social structures, while Helliwell and Putnam (2004) demonstrated that trust, reciprocity, and community participation are closely related to well-being. This perspective is especially useful for urban sociology, because city life is not experienced only through income or formal services: it is also experienced through whether residents feel supported, safe, and connected to meaningful networks.

The Central Asian literature reinforces this argument. Chulanova (2024) shows that the quality of life in Kazakhstan must be assessed through a combination of objective and subjective indicators. Makulbayeva et al. (2023) identify important rural-urban differences in subjective well-being across Central Asia. Nurdinova (2025) extends the regional perspective by demonstrating that family ties, neighborhood trust, cultural norms, health, and social support are all central to how happiness is produced in the region. In this context, traditions and values should not be treated as residual cultural variables; they can function as sources of meaning, belonging, and social stability.

Urban well-being is also conditioned by the quality of the built and ecological environment. Public space, everyday safety, environmental pressures, and access to healthcare influence whether urban resources become livable advantages or sources

of stress. This is particularly relevant in Central Asia, where urbanization often sharpens the divide between modernized centers and socially unequal or environmentally burdened spaces (Nurdinova, 2025). Consequently, happiness in cities must be linked not only to private resources but also to public and infrastructural conditions.

Digitalization represents an additional feature of the contemporary urban environment. Research on smart-city practices in Kazakhstan indicates that digital technologies may facilitate access to services and communication, although their relevance to quality of life depends on institutional arrangements, accessibility, and social inclusion (Mendybayev et al., 2022; Zhubanazarov et al., 2025). In the present study, digitalization is therefore considered as part of the broader urban context reflected in the expert assessments rather than as a directly measured explanatory variable.

The literature leads to three analytical expectations. First, self-rated happiness and the examined social indicators are expected to vary across Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek because the three cities represent distinct urban and social contexts. Second, health and social support are expected to show stronger positive associations with self-rated happiness than material conditions alone. Third, traditions and values are expected to be positively associated with self-rated happiness through their potential links with social belonging, continuity, and cultural embeddedness. These expectations are examined as patterns of association rather than causal relationships.

Materials and methods

Research design

The study employed a cross-sectional comparative mixed-methods design combining a quantitative survey of residents of three Central Asian cities with a qualitative expert component. Data were collected in 2025 in Almaty (Kazakhstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). The study was exploratory and aimed to compare self-rated happiness and selected social conditions across the three urban contexts rather than to produce nationally representative estimates.

Sample and measures

The total quantitative sample is $N = 511$, including 174 respondents from Almaty (34.1%), 237 from Tashkent (46.3%), and 100 from Bishkek (19.6%). The survey used a structured questionnaire with 1-5

self-assessment scales, where higher values indicate more positive evaluations. The dependent variable is self-rated happiness. The principal explanatory variables are income/material conditions, health, social support, and traditions/values.

Because the article works with construct-level self-assessment indicators, the variables are interpreted as perceived social conditions rather than as objective administrative measures. The conceptual frame is subjective well-being, but the empirical model is narrower and focuses on self-rated happiness. This distinction is essential: the article does not claim to measure the full OECD architecture of subjective well-being.

Qualitative expert component

To deepen interpretation, the study also uses structured short responses from 15 experts – five each from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The expert material was coded along four dimensions: the principal driver of urban well-being, the main mediator, the role of digital participation, and aggregate thematic flags. The analytical categories were ecological and urban environment (ECO), social capital (SC), digital context (DC), cultural identity (CI), and economic stability (ES). The qualitative layer is used to interpret quantitative patterns rather than to substitute for survey-based measurement.

Analytical strategy

The quantitative analysis proceeds in four stages. First, descriptive statistics summarize the city profiles. Second, one-way ANOVA is used to test between-city differences; when the assumption of equal variances is violated, Welch ANOVA is applied, followed by Tukey or Games-Howell post hoc tests. Third, Pearson correlations are used to estimate the bivariate structure of associations among the variables. Fourth, to complement the bivariate results, a standardized linear model is reconstructed from the full correlation matrix reported in the article. Under a common-case correlation matrix, this procedure is algebraically equivalent to OLS estimated on standardized variables; in the present article it is used as a robustness check for the relative weight of the predictors.

The qualitative material is processed through thematic coding and frequency-based interpretation, after which it is triangulated with the quantitative findings. The study is cross-sectional and relies on self-report measures; therefore, the results are interpreted as patterned associations and comparative urban profiles rather than as direct causal effects.

Results and discussion

Descriptive profile of the three cities

Across the full sample, the mean value of self-rated happiness is 3.05 (SD = 0.83). The mean values of the explanatory variables are 3.00 for income/material conditions (SD = 0.81), 2.91 for health (SD = 0.77), 2.99 for social support (SD = 0.80), and 3.18 for traditions/values

(SD = 0.80). At the city level, Almaty records the highest average happiness and health scores, Bishkek has the highest social support score, and Tashkent reports lower average values on most indicators. The overall pattern suggests that urban well-being in the three cases is structured by different combinations of material, health-related, social, and cultural resources rather than by a single dominant factor.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Self-Rated Happiness and Social Indicators by City

Indicator	Overall M (SD)	Almaty	Tashkent	Bishkek
Happiness	3.05 (0.83)	3.29 (0.82)	2.93 (0.81)	2.91 (0.79)
Income/material conditions	3.00 (0.81)	3.08 (0.78)	2.92 (0.81)	3.03 (0.85)
Health	2.91 (0.77)	3.12 (0.72)	2.84 (0.78)	2.73 (0.76)
Social support	2.99 (0.80)	3.11 (0.64)	2.76 (0.81)	3.31 (0.88)
Traditions/values	3.18 (0.80)	3.38 (0.77)	2.98 (0.78)	3.29 (0.82)

Note: Almaty n = 174; Tashkent n = 237; Bishkek n = 100. Scale: 1-5.

Between-city differences

The ANOVA results confirm that the differences across cities are statistically meaningful. Happiness differs significantly across the three cases, $F(2, 508) = 11.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .043$, with Almaty scoring higher than both Tashkent and Bishkek. Health follows a similar pattern, $F(2, 508) = 10.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .040$. Social support and traditions/values

also differ significantly across cities in the Welch tests, with Tashkent scoring below both Almaty and Bishkek. By contrast, income/material conditions do not show a statistically significant intercity difference. Substantively, these results indicate that the strongest urban contrasts are concentrated not in perceived income, but in health, social support, and value-related embeddedness.

Table 2

Between-city differences: ANOVA / Welch ANOVA results

Indicator	Test	F (df)	p	η^2	Post hoc
Happiness	ANOVA	11.41 (2, 508)	< .001	.043	Almaty > Tashkent; Almaty > Bishkek
Income/material conditions	ANOVA	2.09 (2, 508)	.124	.008	Not significant
Health	ANOVA	10.55 (2, 508)	< .001	.040	Almaty > Tashkent; Almaty > Bishkek
Social support	Welch	19.04 (2, 249.83)	< .001	.077	Almaty > Tashkent; Bishkek > Tashkent
Traditions/values	Welch	14.30 (2, 255.23)	< .001	.053	Almaty > Tashkent; Bishkek > Tashkent

Note: Welch ANOVA and Games-Howell post hoc tests were used where the homogeneity-of-variance assumption was violated.

Correlational structure of happiness

The bivariate correlations show that health ($r = .589$, $p < .001$) and social support ($r = .582$, $p < .001$) are the strongest correlates of self-rated happiness.

Income/material conditions are also positively associated with happiness ($r = .451$, $p < .001$), followed by traditions/values ($r = .382$, $p < .001$). The intercorrelations among the predictors are positive

but modest to moderate, ranging from .140 to .349, which indicates that the explanatory dimensions are connected but not redundant. Taken together,

the correlation matrix points to a multidimensional structure in which happiness is most strongly linked to everyday health and supportive social relations.

Table 3

Pearson correlations among variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Happiness	-				
2. Income/material conditions	.451***	-			
3. Health	.589***	.269***	-		
4. Social support	.582***	.223***	.349***	-	
5. Traditions/values	.382***	.140**	.142**	.204***	-

Note: $N = 511$. ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Supplementary standardized model

The supplementary standardized model reinforces the bivariate picture rather than overturning it. The model explains 0.618 of the variance in self-rated happiness (adjusted $R^2 = 0.614$; $F(4, 506) = 204.23$, $p < .001$). Health ($\beta = 0.369$) and social support ($\beta = 0.354$) remain the strongest predictors when the variables are considered jointly. Income/material

conditions ($\beta = 0.242$) and traditions/values ($\beta = 0.224$) also retain independent positive effects, but their contribution is clearly smaller. The low VIF values indicate that multicollinearity is not a substantive concern. In substantive terms, the model confirms that health and social support occupy the core of the happiness structure even after overlap among the predictors is taken into account.

Table 4

Supplementary standardized model predicting self-rated happiness

Predictor	beta	SE	t	p	VIF
Income/material conditions	0.242	0.029	8.35	< .001	1.11
Health	0.369	0.030	12.27	< .001	1.19
Social support	0.354	0.030	11.79	< .001	1.19
Traditions/values	0.224	0.028	7.91	< .001	1.06

Note: Coefficients are standardized. The model is reconstructed from the correlation matrix reported in Table 3 and is used as a robustness check. Model fit: $R^2 = 0.618$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.614$, $F(4, 506) = 204.23$, $p < .001$.

Expert triangulation

The expert component clarifies the mechanisms behind the survey results. The ecological and urban environment (ECO) is identified most often as the principal driver of urban well-being, whereas social capital (SC) appears most often as the principal mediator. Digital context (DC) is not selected as an independent primary driver in any case, but it does appear as a secondary mechanism that reinforces access, feedback, and connectivity in specific contexts. Aggregate thematic flags tell the same story:

references to public space appear 10 times, weak autonomous digital effect 8 times, digital governance 7 times, and community resilience 6 times.

The city-level expert profiles are also distinctive. Almaty is best described as a resource-infrastructure profile, in which urban resources and service access are relatively strong. Bishkek appears as a community-integrative profile, where social support and public-space quality help sustain well-being. Tashkent is more accurately interpreted as segmented-adaptive: modernization is

present, but its social benefits do not automatically translate into stronger everyday well-being. These ideal-typical profiles should be treated as interpre-

tive devices, but they help explain why similar regional conditions produce different urban happiness outcomes.

Table 5

Expert coding: principal drivers and mediators

Dimension	Principal driver, n	Principal mediator, n	Interpretation
Ecological and urban environment (ECO)	8	2	Public space, safety, green infrastructure, and service access form the structural basis of urban well-being.
Social capital (SC)	4	6	Social relations are the main mechanism through which urban conditions are translated into everyday well-being.
Digital context (DC)	0	4	Digitalization is not an autonomous driver, but it can reinforce access, communication, and public feedback.
Cultural identity (CI)	1	3	Belonging and symbolic ties provide meaning, continuity, and cultural stability.
Economic stability (ES)	2	0	Material security remains important, but it is not the dominant mediating factor.

Note: Based on 15 coded expert responses from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan

The study shows that self-rated happiness in Central Asian cities is structured by a combination of material, health, social, cultural, and urban-contextual factors, but not all of these factors carry the same weight. The quantitative analysis reveals patterned intercity differences, while the expert layer clarifies how these differences are embedded in urban conditions. Taken together, the findings support an interpretation of urban happiness as a multilevel social outcome rather than a simple reflection of income or technological modernization.

The strongest result is the centrality of health and social support. Both variables exhibit the highest zero-order correlations with happiness and remain the strongest predictors in the supplementary standardized model. This pattern aligns with international well-being frameworks and with regional scholarship emphasizing the role of everyday security, accessible services, and social embeddedness (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; OECD, 2025; Nurdinova, 2025). In urban settings, subjective health is not merely a private condition; it also reflects access to healthcare, ecological quality, mobility, and the broader livability of the city. Social support, likewise, captures more than interpersonal warmth; it indexes whether residents are integrated into reliable networks of reciprocity, trust, and community assistance. Bishkek's high score on social support suggests that community resources can partially

compensate for more limited material or infrastructural advantages.

Income and material conditions remain important, but the article shows why they should not be treated as sufficient. Income is positively associated with happiness, yet it does not distinguish the cities statistically. This implies that similar perceived material conditions can coexist with different well-being outcomes depending on health, support, and urban context. Traditions/values also retain a meaningful positive association with happiness in both the correlational and supplementary model results. In the Central Asian setting, this variable is best interpreted not as a residue of conservatism, but as an indicator of cultural anchoring, social meaning, and symbolic continuity. Under conditions of rapid urban change, such anchoring may stabilize everyday well-being.

The role of digitalization becomes clearer when the expert layer is integrated with the survey results. Digital context was not identified as a principal driver in any expert response, but it appeared repeatedly as a mediator or amplifier. This pattern supports a non-technodeterministic interpretation: digitalization matters when it improves access to services, strengthens channels of public feedback, or supports social connectivity; it matters less when it remains transactional, segmented, or socially detached. In this sense, digitalization is better understood as an

enabling infrastructure than as an autonomous producer of happiness. This interpretation is consistent with smart-city research that stresses inclusion and governance quality, rather than technology alone, as the decisive condition of public benefit (Mendybayev et al., 2022; Zhubanazarov et al., 2025).

The city-level patterns can be summarized as three ideal-typical profiles. Almaty appears as a resource-infrastructure profile, where higher happiness is linked to stronger health evaluations and relatively strong traditions/values. Bishkek represents a community-integrative profile, in which dense social support appears to sustain well-being even without clear material advantage. Tashkent is better described as segmented-adaptive: the city reflects modernization and scale, but lower average scores suggest that these features do not automatically generate everyday well-being. These profiles should be treated as interpretive heuristics rather than rigid typologies, yet they help explain why urban well-being differs across cities that share a broader regional context.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is cross-sectional and cannot support causal claims. Second, all quantitative variables are self-assessments measured on 1-5 scales, so the findings reflect perceived rather than objective conditions and may contain common-method variance. Third, the study uses an analytical urban sample designed for intercity comparison rather than nationally representative inference. Fourth, the construct-level variables do not exhaust the full OECD architecture of subjective well-being. Fifth, digitalization was not directly measured in the survey and is therefore interpreted primarily through the expert component. Finally, the supplementary standardized model is presented as a robustness check reconstructed from the reported covariance structure; future research should estimate full individual-level models with direct indicators of digital participation, trust in e-services, and platform-based civic engagement.

Even with these limitations, the article has clear practical implications. Urban well-being policy

in Central Asia should not be reduced to income growth or the expansion of digital platforms alone. Policies are more likely to improve lived happiness when they combine accessible healthcare, safe and usable public space, support for neighborhood and community ties, and inclusive digital governance. For researchers, the results point to the value of integrating subjective well-being measures with urban-sociological and digital-governance perspectives in future comparative studies.

Conclusion

This article comparatively examined self-rated happiness in Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek and its associations with selected social factors. The study shows that happiness differs across the three cities and is most strongly associated with health and social support. Income and traditions/values matter as well, but they do not displace the central role of everyday social and health-related conditions. The supplementary standardized model supports this pattern by showing that health and social support remain the most strongly associated factors when the variables are considered jointly.

The expert component additionally clarifies the place of digitalization within the broader urban context. In the Central Asian cities examined here, digitalization is not considered an independently measured determinant of happiness. Its relevance appears to be conditional: it becomes socially meaningful when it supports service accessibility, public feedback, social trust, and inclusive urban life. Urban happiness in Central Asia can therefore be understood as a multilevel social phenomenon associated with material conditions, health, social capital, cultural belonging, and the quality of the urban environment.

Author Contributions

Omarova Aishat: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft.

Kenzhakimova Gulnara: data curation, investigation, visualization, writing – review and editing.

References

- Abdina, A., & Uyzbayeva, A. (2024). Philosophy of well-being: Quality of life and inclusion of the elderly population of Kazakhstan in the era of digitalization. *Bulletin of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. Historical Sciences. Philosophy. Religious Studies*, 148(3), 164-177. <https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-7255-2024-148-3-164-177>
- Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2024, July 22). *Quality of life of the population*. <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/labor-and-income/stat-life/publications/183426/>

- Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2025, December 25). *Quality of life index in Kazakhstan*. <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/labor-and-income/stat-life/publications/470846/>
- Chulanova, Z. K. (2024). Quality of life of the population of Kazakhstan: Assessment of the main parameters and identification of problem areas. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 59(2), 656-670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221120924>
- Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, 95-120. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2780243>
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95(3), 542-575. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542>
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D., De Neve, J.-E., Aknin, L. B., & Wang, S. (2025). World Happiness Report 2025. *Well-being Research Centre, University of Oxford*. <https://www.worldhappiness.report/ed/2025/>
- Helliwell, J. F., & Putnam, R. D. (2004). The social context of well-being. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 359(1449), 1435-1446. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2004.1522>
- Kahneman, D., & Deaton, A. (2010). High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107(38), 16489-16493. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1011492107>
- Kalyuzhnova, Y., & Kambhampati, U. (2008). The determinants of individual happiness in Kazakhstan. *Economic Systems*, 32(3), 285-299. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecosys.2008.02.001>
- Makulbayeva, G.A., Davletbayeva, Zh.Zh., & Dyussenov, M. M. (2023). Subjective well-being in Central Asia: Rural-urban differences. *Bulletin of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. Pedagogy. Psychology. Sociology Series*, 145(4), 363-373. <https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-6895-2023-145-4-363-373>
- Mendiybayev, B., Burbayeva, P., Otar, E., & Zhupankhan, A. (2022). Balancing smart city stakeholders' expectations: Case of Kazakhstan cities. *Public Administration and Civil Service*, 1(80), 58-66. <https://doi.org/10.52123/1994-2370-2022-579>
- Nurdinova, S. (2025). Happiness and life satisfaction in Central Asia (Quality of Life in Asia, Vol. 24). *Springer Singapore*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-3082-3>
- OECD. (2025). OECD guidelines on measuring subjective well-being (2025 update). *OECD Publishing*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9203632a-en>
- Zhubanazarov, S., Ulakov, S., & Yordanova, D. (2025). Digital transformation of the city management process. *Public Administration and Civil Service*, 1(92), 153-163. <https://doi.org/10.52123/1994-2370-2025-1326>

Information about the authors:

Omarova Aishat (corresponding author) – PhD student of the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Farabi University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: oaishatt@gmail.com).

Kenzhakimova Gulnara – Candidate of Sociological Sciences, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Farabi University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: gulnar.kenzhakimova@kaznu.kz).

Авторлар туралы мәлімет:

Омарова Айшат Ниязбековна (корреспонденттік автор) – әлеуметтану және әлеуметтік жұмыс кафедрасының докторанты, Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: oaishatt@gmail.com).

Кенжакимова Гульнара Аляевна – әлеуметтану ғылымдарының кандидаты, әлеуметтану және әлеуметтік жұмыс кафедрасының аға оқытушысы, Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: gulnar.kenzhakimova@kaznu.kz).

Сведения об авторах:

Омарова Айшат Ниязбековна (автор-корреспондент) – докторант кафедры социологии и социальной работы, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: oaishatt@gmail.com);

Кенжакимова Гульнара Аляевна – кандидат социологических наук, старший преподаватель кафедры социологии и социальной работы, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: gulnar.kenzhakimova@kaznu.kz).

Received: March 24, 2026

Accepted: August 28, 2026